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ABSTRACT

This paper explores moral sensitivity in Finnish secondary school teachers and students. Moral sensitivity comprises capacities to identify and interpret different kinds of situations in the ethical framework; it is the awareness of how our actions affect other people. In the teaching profession, teachers have to consider different lines of action in dealing with their students, parents, and colleagues. An important challenge is to become aware that moral issues are involved in these interactive relations. Moral sensitivity in teaching requires readiness to identify and solve moral dilemmas at school. In the learning process, students are exposed to different subjects and scientific issues defined by the curriculum. Moral sensitivity in learning includes awareness of moral dilemmas in the learning environment and capabilities to reflect on them with empathy and role-taking skills. Furthermore, learning should include critical reflection on scientific issues from an ethical point of view. The challenge for both teachers and students is to become aware of the ethical frameworks and the knowledge base that is guiding their moral reasoning. This paper presents some empirical findings of the moral dilemmas teachers and students have identified as relevant in their teaching and learning. A special emphasis is placed on the moral knowledge that guides their argumentation in justifying moral decision-making in these cases. (Contains 4 figures and 15 references.) (MKA)

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In search of moral sensitivity in teaching and learning

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore moral sensitivity of Finnish secondary school teachers and students. Moral sensitivity includes capacities to identify and interpret different kinds of situations in the ethical framework. According to Bebeau, Rest & Narvaez (1999) moral sensitivity is the awareness of how our actions affect other people. In the teaching profession, teachers have to consider different possible lines of action in dealing with their students, parents and colleagues. An important challenge for teachers is to become aware that moral issues are involved in these interactive relations. Moral sensitivity in teaching requires readiness to identify and solve moral dilemmas at school (Tirri 1996a, Tirri 1999).

In the learning process, students are exposed to different subjects and scientific issues defined by the curriculum. Moral sensitivity in learning includes awareness of moral dilemmas in the learning environment and capabilities to reflect on them with empathy and role-taking skills. Furthermore, learning should include critical reflection on scientific issues from ethical point of view. The challenge for both teachers and students is to become aware of the ethical frameworks and the knowledge base that is guiding their moral reasoning. In this paper, we present some empirical findings of the moral dilemmas teachers and students have identified relevant in their teaching and learning. A special emphasis is shown to the moral knowledge that is guiding their argumentation in justifying moral decision-making in these cases.

2. Theoretical Framework

In the moral domain pupils have certain learning challenges in school in addition to those in the cognitive, affective and social domains. Some of the learning goals are explicitly expressed in the national curriculum, for example, knowledge and application of the Golden Rule (Framework Curriculum for the Secondary School 1994). In addition to this very abstract guideline, schools and classes have established their own ethical rules that the pupils should learn to follow. In the best cases, teachers and pupils have negotiated these rules together, according to the idea of just community promoted by Kohlberg and his followers (Kohlberg et al. 1975, Oser 1996). However, a great deal of moral learning takes place unplanned through the general moral messages delivered by teachers and other pupils in school (Jackson et al. 1993).

In addition to implicit moral learning discussed above, we can promote moral learning explicitly through moral education. Formal moral education can be a part of all the subjects taught in school. However, in Finland religious education and ethics provide a basic knowledge of the concepts needed in discussing ethical issues. In order to promote ethical sensitivity of pupils the moral discourse should address the real-life

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moral dilemmas that pupils have faced in their life. The research conducted in this area shows that the adolescents formulate dilemmas that are very different from the hypothetical dilemmas used by Kohlberg and his colleagues to assess moral reasoning (Yussen 1977, Colangelo 1982, Tirri 1996b).

Moral development includes other aspects besides moral judgment measured by DIT scores (Rest 1986). The real-life moral dilemmas require moral sensitivity and moral motivation. Before an individual can make responsible moral judgments, he/she needs to identify real-life moral dilemmas in different contexts. Bebeau, Rest & Narvaez have proposed the Four Component Model that lists four basic component processes upon which morality is built. These processes include moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation and moral character. The model implies that all four processes of morality need to be fostered in order to establish an effective moral education program. Furthermore, the Four Component model directs us to consider the various kinds of moral knowledge required for effective moral functioning (Bebeau, Rest & Narvaez 1999).

3. Analysis Methods

Secondary school teachers from two different schools (N=58) and ninth-grade students from the same schools (N=93) were asked to identify moral dilemmas in their own learning environment. The data included thirteen responses from students of same grade-level who had been identified gifted in science (Tirri & Pehkonen 1998). In addition to moral dilemmas in their own learning environment, the gifted students were asked to reflect on moral dilemmas in science and to provide solutions to them. All the teachers and all the students were interviewed and the students wrote essays about moral conflicts in their school or in science. The methods used to analyze the essays and interviews were a descriptive content analysis. The essays and interviews were analyzed by their themes and the principles used in solving moral dilemmas in different contexts. The arguments used by teachers and pupils were analyzed using the technical terms of Toulmin (1958) to analyze arguments in different fields. Toulmin uses the term "warrant" to describe the general legitimacy of an argument. A warrant certifies the soundness of the argument used (Toulmin 1958, 100). The more abstract justification behind arguments is called "backing" (Toulmin 1958, 105). These abstract justifications include theories or values. A special interest of the study was to investigate the justifications of teachers and pupils for their solutions to moral dilemmas they had identified. The warrants and backings used in their reasoning allowed us to explore the different ethical frameworks on which these justifications were based.

In teachers' data a special emphases was given on the nature of moral knowledge presented in teachers' arguments. In students' data the emphasis was on the ethical framework guiding their arguments.

4. Empirical Results

4.1 The moral sensitivity of teachers

In teachers' data a total of four main categories of themes were formed. These categories are the following: 1. Matters related to teachers' work, 2. The morality of students' behavior regarding school and work, 3. The rights of minority groups, and 4. Common rules in school (Tirri 1999). From each category of moral dilemmas the most typical justifications behind the teachers' arguments were analyzed. The argument analysis showed that the moral reasoning of teachers was based on both rational and intuitive thinking. The moral knowledge was based on both phronesis type of knowledge and episteme type of knowledge. Depending on the content and the context of the dilemma, the teachers used different patterns and knowledge base in their moral thinking.

4.1.1 Intuitive responses to moral dilemmas

In a case that belonged to the category of matters related to teachers' work a male teacher had thrown one pupil out from the classroom in a violent way. This particular pupil did not belong to the group the teacher was teaching and he was disturbing the lesson continuously. First, the teacher had friendly asked the pupil to leave but he did not obey the teacher. In fact, the pupil started to make fun of the teacher and made him very angry at his behavior. The teacher got so angry that he grasped the pupil and carried him out from the classroom. During this episode the teacher had pressed the pupil against the wall a couple of times making some unfriendly comments. In an interview the teacher reflected this episode in the following way:

"It was a situation that made me think about my behavior afterwards. I thought I went too far and I did wrong. You should never go that far in your behavior. However, I was so angry that I could not help myself. I think nothing else would have worked in this situation. It was such a spontaneous act in that situation" (Male, eight years of teaching experience)

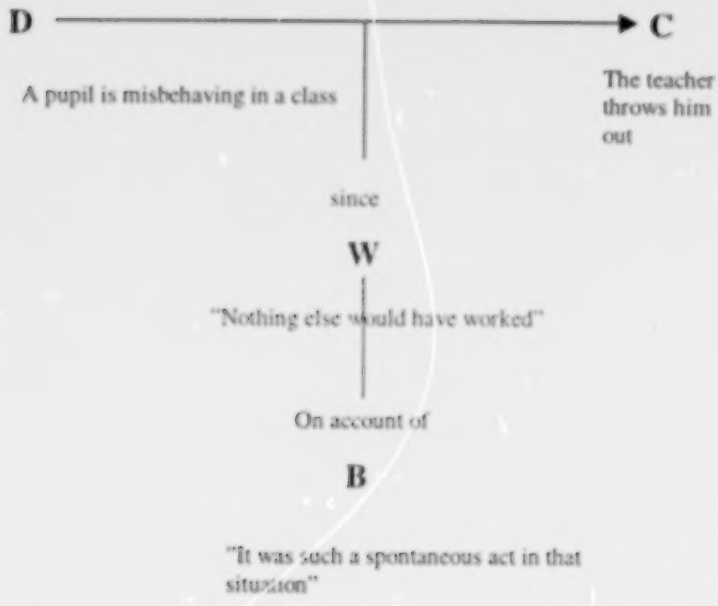

Figure 1. The layout of an intuitive argument

This case was a typical situation in a classroom where a pupil misbehaved and the teacher needed to decide an appropriate way of dealing with his misbehavior. We have presented a quite from an interview to describe the teacher's point of view in a reliable way. We have analyzed teacher's arguments with the help of technical terms developed by Toulmin (1958). As Figure 1 shows the data (D) provided by the teacher can be formulated "a pupil is misbehaving in a class". The teacher tried to be friendly and asked the pupil to leave the classroom. According to the teacher the pupil started to make fun of the teacher making him very angry. The teacher made an intuitive decision and carried the pupil out from the classroom. In our analysis "the teacher throws him out" forms the conclusion (C) of this episode. We can justify the intuitive base of teacher's decision-making by his warrant (W) given in this episode. The warrant a teacher used was an intuitive judgment *"nothing else would have worked"*. The more abstract principle behind teacher's argument, backing (B), confirms our analysis of intuitive base of reasoning: *"It was such a spontaneous act in that situation'* .

This case illustrated teachers' moral knowledge that was practical and intuitive in nature. This kind of knowledge is less conscious, intuitive knowledge that is very situation-specific and related to the context. Aristotle calls this kind of moral knowledge phronesis (Korthagen & Kessels 1999). Teachers' reasoning in this case represented a typical reflection in-action (Schön 1987) where no time was allowed for the teacher to think he needed to act.

4.1.2 Rational responses to moral dilemmas at school

In another case in the category of pupils' work moral it is a pupil that the teacher described as "the weakest pupil in the class" who refused to go into the same small group with a fat girl. He had said loud: "I do not work with a person like that, I can not learn anything with her". The teacher told that this kind of situation is a very typical one and repeats itself every single day. According to the teacher pupils are cruel to each other and use very hurtful language in evaluating each other's appearance and skills. The teacher did not say anything at the moment this episode happened but she asked both pupils involved to stay with her after the class. The teacher discussed the episode with these two pupils but they did not find any solution then. The teacher asked the pupils to come and talk to her the next day in the teachers' room before the classes start. The teacher described the conference in the next day like this:

"We went to talk in a private room. Then I asked the girl in front of the boy how does she feel to hear such comments than the one yesterday by this boy. The girl replied that it does not feel very good, it feels very bad indeed. Then I asked the boy if he has ever paid any attention to the feelings these kinds of comments could cause to the others. I asked him to imagine what it would be like to hear those comments himself daily, to hear things like nobody wants to work with you. This touched the boy and told us that he has never thought it in that respect. Then I guided him to make a deal with that girl not to do it ever again. They shaked hands and he promised not to do it anymore, at least to this particular girl. After that conference I have never heard that he would have been mean to this girl again. I think this is very important: always pay attention to these kinds of episodes and not to let them go unnoticed. But it is so difficult because these episodes occur everyday and in every lesson. You do not have time to get involved every time. It is only the meanest and the cruelest things you have time to pay attention to. I think every person is valuable and we should teach the kids not to treat each other in a bad way. The principle behind this view is my respect for other people. Everybody is valuable as a person." (Female, 10 years teaching experience)

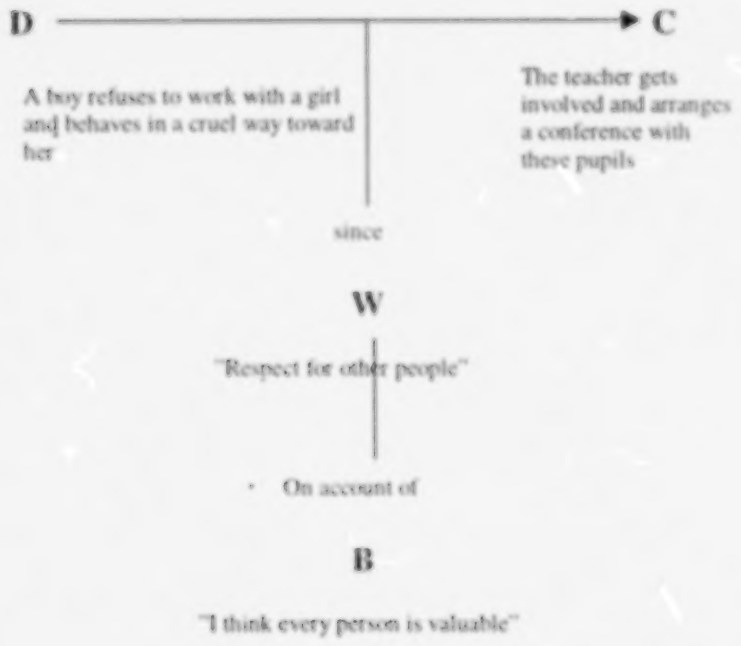
D
C
A boy refuses to work with a girl and behaves in a cruel way toward her
The teacher gets involved and arranges a conference with these pupils
since
W
"Respect for other people"
On account of
B
"I think every person is valuable"

Figure 2. The layout of a rational argument.

This case reflects rational basis of justifying the practical arguments. The teacher in this episode had observed a very typical moral dilemma in her work, a pupil behaved in a cruel way toward another pupil. The data (D) in this case is the actual behavior of the boy "a boy refuses to work with a girl and behaves in a cruel way toward her" (see Figure 2). The conclusion (C) of an episode was that the teacher was involved in the situation and she arranged a conference with these pupils in the next day. In this episode the teacher did not act in an impulsive way. She did not say anything at the moment the episode happened but she made a rational choice to discuss with these pupils later. The justification the teacher provided for her actions was her warrant (W) "respect for other people," that did not allow her to ignore cruel behavior in her classroom. The teacher had a philosophical backing (B) in her rational thinking: the value of a human being was the ethical standard guiding her decision-making.

Teacher's moral knowledge in this case can be identified as episteme type of knowledge where the teacher uses general concepts that are applicable to a wide variety of situations in her argumentation. Teacher's action in this moral dilemma can be classified as reflection on-action (Schön 1987) where the teacher reflected the case afterwards and had plenty of time to think about her actions.

4.2 The moral sensitivity of students

The ninth-grade students were asked to reflect on moral dilemmas in their everyday life. A school was chosen to represent the mutual context of the story. The adolescents received instructions to write an essay describing a situation in which they or their friends had been treated unfairly. They were asked to describe the moral dilemma in detail and to provide all the necessary information concerning the situation, including the consequences. They were also encouraged to provide a just solution to the dilemma identified, along with the principles guiding their judgment. The essays were analyzed by their themes and the principles used in justifying the action.

4.2.1 Deontological responses to moral dilemmas at school

Majority of the essays concerned issues related to the unjust behavior of a teacher (N=62). These cases included inequality of chances given to the students, unfair punishments, grading policy and ignorance and lack of empathy. In interpersonal relations, the students were able to identify the duties of a person who is responsible for a conflict. The students advocated deontological ethics of categorical duties, which allows no exceptions. In the context of the school community, the students identified duties that belong to teachers' professional conduct. These duties included equal treatment of all the students, empathy on all occasions (even with aggressive students) and willingness to discuss the principles underlying teachers' grading and homework policies. The duties of students concerned the right to protect oneself, the duty to get help if needed and the duty to be fair to other students.

In the essays, the adolescents identified teachers' unjust behavior as the most common moral dilemma. A quote from an essay describes an unjust situation in the following way: "I answered the teacher's questions without raising my hand, and the teacher

admonished me for my behavior. During the next lesson, two ballet dancers in my class shouted their answers without raising their hands, and the teacher praised them for their right answers. I think it was unjust for the teacher to treat us unequally. The teacher should have admonished those students as well." (Laura)

In the interview, students were asked to clarify their principles concerning the solution to teachers' unjust behavior. A majority of the students emphasized the duties of a teacher to act according to just rules. As Figure 3 shows, the data (D) provided by the students' essays could be formulated as: "Teachers treat students unequally." Based on their observations, the students made the conclusion (C) that: "Teachers' behavior is not morally justified." The students expressed their idea of an ideal teacher as one who acts according to the duties of a teacher. Justice was identified as an important duty of a teacher. The warrant (W) used to justify the demands on a teacher was expressed as "The duties of a teacher." The more abstract principle backing (B) behind their reasoning was stated as "Ethical conduct of a profession." The adolescents emphasized the duties as the guiding principles in solving everyday moral dilemmas. In Figure 3 a typical deontological argument in the context of everyday moral issues can be seen.

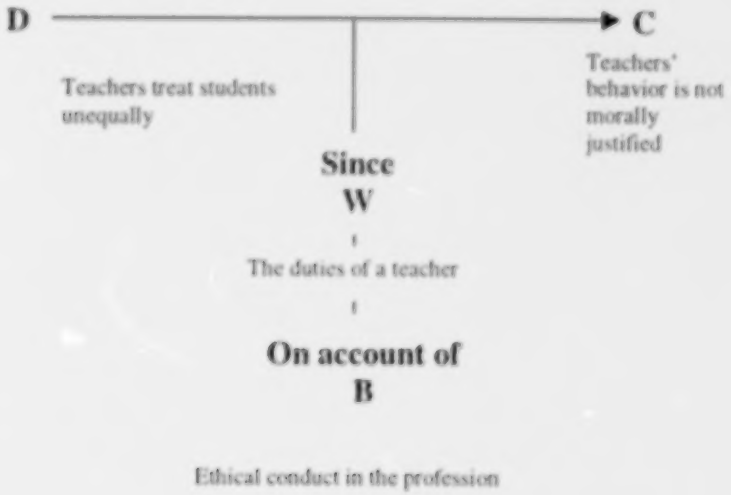

Figure 3. The layout of a deontological argument

4.2.2 Utilitarian responses to moral dilemmas in science

A group of pupils gifted in science (N=13) were asked to identify every-day moral dilemmas in the context of science. The argument analysis showed different patterns to justify arguments in science and everyday life. Based on the findings, it seems like the moral reasoning in science is qualitatively different from the moral reasoning in everyday life. The differences can be partly explained by the different ethical frameworks that guided students in their justification process. Scientific reasoning was shown to be based on utilitarian ethics with some exceptions to the general rules.

The theme most often written about by the adolescents (twelve students out of thirteen) dealt with archeological research in graves. The moral dilemma identified in this context concerned the scientific knowledge gained from this research versus the rights of the dead to rest in peace. The following quote illustrates the principle of scientific profit used in justifying this research:

"If the research in graves brings real scientific profit, new knowledge in science, I think it is justified. I don't think it is justified only for the profit of a single person or for making money. (Larry)

As Figure 4 shows, the data (D) provided by the student essays can be formulated thus: "Archeological research in graves is a moral dilemma in science." In our analysis, a majority of the students advocated this kind of scientific research and made a conclusion (C): "The research is morally justified." The students justified their solution to this dilemma by the warrant (W): "It brings scientific profit." In Larry's reasoning a more abstract principle can be seen behind his argument. He uses "New scientific knowledge" as a backing (B) in his argument. However, there are exceptional circumstances in which the conclusion needs a qualifier (Q). The task of the qualifier is to qualify the conclusion of the argument. The rebuttal (R) indicates circumstances in which the general authority of the warrant would have to be set aside. In our data the living relatives represent the rebuttal in students' arguments. As the interviews indicate, the students reason that archeological research in graves is morally justified unless the relatives of the dead are still living.

In Figure 4 a typical layout of a utilitarian argument can be seen. The utilitarian ethical principles are reflected in the warrant and the backing used in justifying the argument. The scientific profit and new knowledge in science are the ethical principles that are used to justify the archeological research in graves. However, in some circumstances the utilitarian argument needs exceptions to the rule. In our example, these exceptions indicate that archeological research in graves is not morally justified if the relatives of the dead are still living.

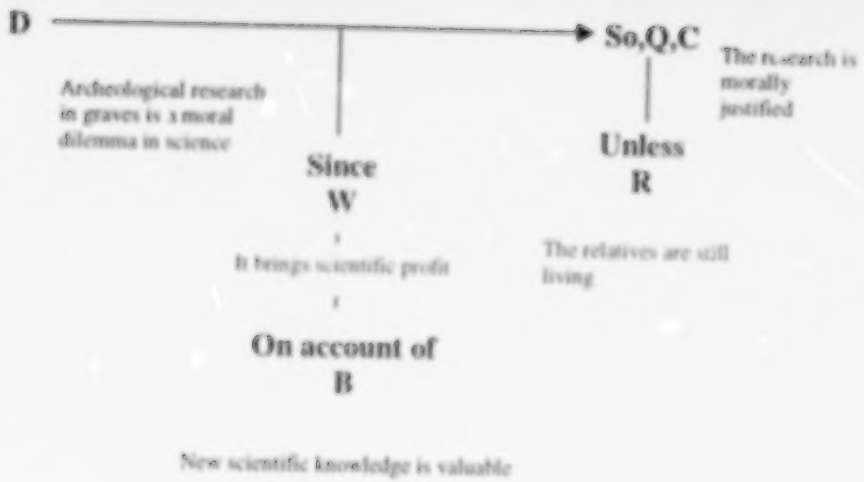

Figure 4. The layout of a utilitarian argument

5. Concluding Remarks

This study adds new knowledge on the moral sensitivity of teachers and pupils. The real-life moral dilemmas identified in school and in science demonstrate the differences in the justifications used in solving moral dilemmas in different contexts. The argument analysis used in this study can be used in moral education as a new approach in fostering the argumentation skills of pupils. The emphases on the identification of everyday moral dilemmas are one of the ways in developing ethical sensitivity of teachers and pupils. The argumentation analysis can add ethical sensitivity of teachers and pupils by revealing the nature of moral knowledge and the ethical framework guiding their moral reasoning.

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